



May 2, 2002

Mr. Dennis P. Duffy
General Counsel
University of Houston System
311 East Cullen Building, Suite 212
Houston, Texas 77204-2028

OR2002-2301

Dear Mr. Duffy:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID#162213.

The University of Houston (the “university”) received a request for a copy of a tape recording of a college hearing pertaining to academic dishonesty. You assert that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.103 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

First, we note that the tape recording submitted to this office as responsive is subject to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (“FERPA”). FERPA provides that no federal funds will be made available under any applicable program to an educational agency or institution that releases personally identifiable information (other than directory information) contained in a student’s education records to anyone but certain enumerated federal, state, and local officials and institutions, unless otherwise authorized by the student or the student’s parent. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1232g(b)(1), (d). “Education records” means those records that contain information directly related to a student and are maintained by an educational agency or institution or by a person acting for such agency or institution. *Id.* § 1232g(a)(4)(A). FERPA provides a student an affirmative right of access to his or her education records:

No funds shall be made available under any applicable program to any educational agency or institution which has a policy of denying, or which effectively prevents, the parents of students who are or have been in attendance at a school of such agency or at such institution, as the case may

be, the right to *inspect and review* the education records of their children. . . . Each educational agency or institution shall establish appropriate procedures for the granting of a request by parents for access to the education records of their children within a reasonable period of time, but in no case more than forty-five days after the request has been made.

. . . .

Students' rather than parents' permission or consent. For the purposes of this section, whenever a student has attained eighteen years of age, or is attending an institution of post-secondary education the permission or consent required of and the rights accorded to the parents of the student shall thereafter only be required of and accorded to the student.

20 U.S.C. § 1232g(a)(1)(A), (d) (emphasis added). Thus, the university may not withhold the requested information based on section 552.103 of the Government Code, as section 552.103, a state statute, is preempted by federal law to the extent it conflicts with that federal law. *See, e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity Comm'n v. City of Orange, Texas*, 905 F. Supp 381, 382 (E.D. Tex. 1995); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 431 (1985) (FERPA, 20 U.S.C. § 1232g, prevails when in conflict with state law, thus, predecessor to section 552.103 may not be applied to deny student right under FERPA to inspect his education records). We therefore find that, if the requestor has the consent of the student to inspect the requested tape, then the tape must be made available to the requestor in its entirety.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records;

2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at 512/475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Michael A. Pearle
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

MAP/seg

Ref: ID# 162213

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Jacqui Brennan
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(w/o enclosures)